

**A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO HISTORIC LANDMARK
DESIGNATION
FOR THE CITY OF
CRYSTAL LAKE**

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Introduction

When I began the journey toward historic landmark designation for my house, I wished I had someone to help me with the logistics of putting together the house history, the application, the presentation, etc. That is the main reason I spent the time putting together this guide to help owners of future historic homes easily get down the path toward historic landmark designation in Crystal Lake. Since I have gone through the process, I can create a logical sequence of steps to guide you. Finding out about your home's history is not a painstaking process, but an enlightening one much like a detective piecing together a mystery. Some people are left with excellent records from previous owners that will make this task easy, but for the sake of this guide, I am assuming all you have to start with is the Plat of Survey. The benefits of historic landmark designation in Crystal Lake are twofold. The first is that the value of the home will increase. The second, but more important, is your pride in the home will increase. The process of historic landmark designation is a labor of love that will take you on a historical journey, build pride in your house, and educate you in the history of our town. Embrace it and good luck!

Using Your Plat

Remember back to the closing on your house? Remember the huge stack of papers you received in that monster envelope? Among those papers you should find a document called a Plat of Survey. The plat shows the dimensions of your property, where the house sits in relation to that property, and a verbal description of your property. The verbal description of your property will be the starting point of your quest. You can obtain three important pieces of information from that paragraph: the name of the original parcel of land (i.e. Walkup's Addition), the block number, and the lot number. This information is crucial to the next step in the journey.

A Trip to the Tax Office

The next step is to head over to the McHenry County Government Center, at 2200 North Seminary Avenue, in Woodstock. You will want to bring with you something to write with, paper, your three pieces of information from the plat, and a lot of patience. There is a small room off to the right when you walk into the main entrance of the tax office. This small room contains public access computers that you will use to go through the tax records on CD. The goal is to go through the tax records and find out who paid the taxes on your lot and how much they paid. If you have some idea when the house was built subtract ten years and start there. The county converted the old tax ledgerbooks to microfilm then to CD with a large town name located above the open ledgerbook entry. This helps your search by giving you a quick visual cue to the town you live in. Remember that prior to 1914 Nunda was separate from Crystal Lake. You need to know what part of town (Nunda or Crystal Lake) your lot is in. Once you get to the town you want begin to look at the top of the page to search for the name of the land development (i.e. Walkup's Addition) your lot belongs. All the entries seem to follow in alphabetical order. When you find your section of town, begin looking for your block number and lot number. Sometimes one owner owned many lots within one block, so record the other lots along with yours. You want to record the total taxes paid and who paid them. Continue on through the years until you see your lot being a lone ledger entry. Odds are that the person paying the taxes purchased the lot from the previous owner. This is a clue signaling the purchaser is preparing to build on that lot. Continue recording the tax paid and who paid it. When you see a sudden increase in the taxes paid on your lot this usually indicates that a house was built. Now you have the year the house was built. You can continue looking for the taxpayer each year and from this information, you can get a year by year listing of who owned the home. Use this information to compile your house history later on. The big revelation from this exercise is having a good idea of what year your house was built. This information will be valuable in the next step.

Reading Old Newspapers

Now that you are armed with the year the house was built and the succession of owners' names, you are ready to spend some evenings in the Crystal Lake Library. Call ahead to schedule some time on the microfilm viewer so you can begin reading the newspapers. Let the staff person know that you want to go through the old Heralds and they will set you up. The library allows a maximum of two hours per session (which is fine because that's about all your eyes can take). You will want to bring your collection of information, a pen, paper, and plenty of dimes to feed the copier on the film viewer to copy interesting things you might find in the paper. The film viewers and microfilm are in the basement of the library. The boxes of film are stored in drawers down there and are in chronological order. Start looking six months prior to the year you think the house was built. You may see some preliminary reports on material delivery or ground breaking. Keep in mind that back in those days building a house took a long period of time - almost a full year in some cases, and was fairly big news. When you find reference to the original owner moving in or finishing building their house, copy that page. Make sure to circle the reference and write the page number and issue date on it as well. This page will be included with your application as proof of the year the house was built.

Don't Be Afraid of the Cemetery

Congratulations - you have verified your build year utilizing the Herald! You now need to fill in the history of the previous owners. The best way is to talk to them directly or contact their relatives if you can find them to create this history. If that fails, your next stop is a cemetery. Crystal Lake has two old cemeteries. Union Cemetery is the bigger of the two and is one of the most scenic and peaceful places in Crystal Lake (as it should be). Lake Avenue Cemetery (formerly known as Crystal Lake Cemetery) is smaller but has quite a few old Crystal Lake residents residing in it. It is amazing the history you can discover by just strolling past the headstones. The main purpose of this trip is to find the grave sites of the previous owners so you can get the years that they passed away. Utilizing the years these people died gives you the ability to go back to the library and the Heralds to find these individuals' obituaries. Hopefully, you will be able to find them, but if you are unsuccessful, the next stop (for the computer literate this may be your first stop) is the McHenry County Genealogical Society web site (<http://nsn.nslsilus.org/clkhome/mcigs>). Go to the web site and choose indices. Then select the index for obituaries in the Crystal Lake Herald. These obituaries go back to 1936. If you need to go back further a hard copy version of this index is available at the library, downstairs in the local history room. It is in a blue three-ring notebook. This printed version currently goes back to 1921. The effort to go back even further is ongoing, and they are currently around 1910. The indices should be updated soon. Obituaries are an unbelievable record of a person's life - from birth, through time in the service, getting married and having children, obituaries are an excellent source of history. You can now write the history of the house and the people who lived there.

Preparing the Application

Successfully armed with the house history, you are ready to begin filling out the Landmark Designation application. You can use old applications as templates to help you put together your application. The first couple of pages of the application provide the rules. Page 3 begins the written part of the application. The toughest part of the application is putting together the list of significant architectural features. I was not even close to an expert on architecture so I went back to the library to read up on Victorian Style homes and what characteristics separate them. Once the list is created and written, attach it to the application along with a copy of the plat of survey, the copy of the newspaper page showing the year it was built (or any other proof you may have), and a copy of your last tax statement. Drop the application and a check for \$25.00 (made out to the City of Crystal Lake) off at City Hall in the Planning Office. The people there are very friendly and helpful and will begin the process for you.

Per the rules the Planning Office will contact you with what needs to be done next. They will schedule when you will appear before the Crystal Lake Historic Preservation Commission to give your presentation (discussed in the next section). About 15 days before that date you need to send by mail the legal notice announcing the hearing for historical designation to all your neighbors within 150 feet of your property. The legal notice includes the description of the property and is provided to you by the Planning Office (see Appendix E). This notice also has to run in the Northwest Herald for one day. Once this is accomplished, you can pick up the sign to be posted in front of your house and complete the affidavit (Appendix D). The affidavit can be notarized right there at city hall. You will need to provide a deposit of \$75.00 for use of the sign that is fully reimbursable when you return the sign on the night of the hearing.

The Presentation

The big day is getting close and you want to prepare for the final phase of the process. The presentation for the Historic Preservation Commission should be between 15 and 30 minutes. There is a slide projector in the council chamber and it is a good medium to use so all can see your house pictures. You need to at least take a pictorial tour around the outside of the house describing the architectural nuances. You may want to show the interior architecture as well, but it is not required. Another nice touch is to describe the history of the house and the succession of owners, but again this is not required. Once the presentation is over members of the Commission will discuss your house with you and ask questions. They will then vote on recommending your house for historical landmark designation to the City Council.

After this meeting is over, the city will contact you with the date this issue will be decided by the city council. This step is just a formality. You need to come to that meeting and when your agenda item comes up, you need to answer whatever questions the members of the City Council have. They have your application and the recommendation of the Commission, so this will only take a few minutes before they vote. If everything goes as planned you will be the proud owner of a Crystal Lake historical landmark.

Ordering the Plaque

Congratulations! If you are to this step you live in a historical house which now needs to be plaqued. The plaque is ordered from the following company:

Erie Landmark Company
14110 Sullyfield Circle
Chantilly, Virginia 20151
PH: 1-800-874-7848 & (703) 968-3930
FAX: 1-703-758-2574
WEB SITE: erielandmark.com

The cost is picked up by the Crystal Lake Historic Preservation Commission as part of the landmarking. It takes about 4 weeks to get the plaque.

Conclusion

By now the plaque is displayed on your house, and you have a new source of house pride. Your job now is to help others with this process and promote the heritage of Crystal Lake. I hope this guide helped you achieve historic landmark designation and made the journey one of enlightenment.